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# His Final Homily: Pope John Paul II's Death as an Affirmation of His Life's Message

Joesph M. Valenzano

*University of Dayton*, [jvalenzanoiii1@udayton.edu](mailto:jvalenzanoiii1@udayton.edu)

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## **Abstract**

Every Sunday morning, a member of the Roman Catholic clergy addresses his flock after a reading from one of the Gospels. These homilies ordinarily last between 10 and 20 minutes and allow the priest an opportunity to interpret the Gospel message from that day's reading, as well as discuss how that message relates to contemporary events and issues.

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## **Disciplines**

Catholic Studies | Critical and Cultural Studies | Interpersonal and Small Group Communication | Mass Communication | Religion | Speech and Rhetorical Studies

## **Comments**

Permission documentation is on file.



# His Final Homily: Pope John Paul II's Death as an Affirmation of his Life's Message

Joseph M. Valenzano III

## INTRODUCTION

Every Sunday morning a member of the Roman Catholic clergy addresses his flock after a reading from one of the Gospels. These homilies ordinarily last between ten and twenty minutes and allow the priest an opportunity to interpret the Gospel message from that day's reading, as well as discuss how that message relates to contemporary events and issues. During the final two months of his life, Pope John Paul II provided a longer, more powerful symbolic homily to the world. It was a message that summarized his positions on freedom, suffering, and the dignity of human life.

John Paul II spent his papacy working for spiritual freedom, from his abhorrence of communism and socialism in the 1980s to his warnings against the dangers of pluralistic liberal democracies in the latter stages of his pontificate. In the 1980s he confronted the dissociation of God from the individual inherent in communism, and was instrumental in the bloodless collapse of the Marxism in Europe and the Soviet Union (Bernstein & Politi, 1996; Weigel, 1999). Although he recognized democracy as the best political philosophy available for freedom to flourish, he cautioned against defining freedom as total autonomy and unchecked individual choice. Rather, his understanding of freedom involved the freedom for people to make the correct moral choice based upon universal truths found in the message of Jesus Christ as that message is understood in Catholic teaching.

The Pope understood one of these truths to be the transformative and redemptive powers of suffering. After his 1980 brush with death at the hands of gunman Mehmet Ali Agca in St. Peter's Square, John Paul preached continuously about the spiritually renewing powers of linking human suffering with Christ's crucifixion, including his apostolic letter, *Salvifici Doloris*, in 1984. During the 1990s with his health declining due to Parkinson's disease, hip surgery, and various other ailments, the Pope called upon those who suffered to not only see themselves as closer to Christ, but to also be sources of strength for those members of the community around them. As biographers Carl Bernstein and Marco Politi put it, "It is as if suffering was fated to become for Wojtyla a permanent sign of his pontificate" (1996, p. 500). John Paul II saw the true nature of suffering as a way of coming closer to Christ, rather than as an evil or a punishment.

In the latter stages of his papacy, John Paul II railed against a "culture of death" that sanctioned, among other things, euthanasia. Proponents of euthanasia argue that suffering destroys, rather than enhances, human dignity, and they recognize the emotional need to end that suffering in individuals whose situations have no viable medical cure. They believe suffering causes the patients to feel alienated from those they love and the community at large, as well as creating a poor quality of life (Fernandes, 2001). The Pope, on the other hand, disagreed vehemently with this approach, contending that individuals always remain connected to the larger human community, and that relationship is only enhanced when they suffer. In addition, he believed that in order to combat the culture of death a true "culture of life" must be established where the most fundamental human right, the right to life, is respected. People, according to the Pope, should be able to die with dignity by respecting the gift of life to the very end (*Evangelium Vitae*, March 25, 1995, hereafter *EV*).

The unique circumstances surrounding the Pope's final two months provided him with an opportunity to once more illustrate his beliefs concerning the importance of freedom, suffering, and the dignity of human life and death. John Paul II spent his papacy spreading these messages verbally, but when the Terry Schiavo controversy approached its culmination in the United States, he could not due to his declining health. Instead, in his final two months the Pontiff responded to this "rhetorical situation" (Bitzer, 1968) with a symbolic homily that represented his positions. This response contained a vocabulary of action, not just words. Each public appearance and report on the condition of John Paul II during this period served to make the world aware of his last homily to the world, one where his life's message did not change: suffering is meaningful, life is precious, and dying with dignity is possible.

In this chapter I will demonstrate how from February 1, 2005, when he entered Gemelli Hospital with breathing problems, until his death on April 2, 2005, the Pope's actions represented a symbolic message to the



world on freedom, suffering, and dying with dignity. In each section I will discuss his life's message on the particular area and then illustrate how that message was inherent in the two months before his death. In the first section, the Pope's final two months are contrasted with the Terry Schiavo events in the United States showing how such a juxtaposition resulted in reiteration of the Pope's warnings about the dangers inherent in democracy and a false conception of freedom. Next, I explain how the Pope's handling of his final painful days exemplified his position on suffering. Finally, I once again revisit the Schiavo ordeal when establishing how John Paul II used his last months to once again emphasize his belief concerning the moral necessity of creating and practicing a "culture of life."

## FREEDOM WITH DIGNITY

Pope John Paul II spent his life championing what he saw as a true understanding of freedom. He understood this freedom as denied by communism, and also was at risk in democratic societies. This section first explicates his rhetoric regarding the relationship between freedom, faith, and truth in any society and elaborates on the Pope's insistence on how a false understanding of freedom can endanger a democracy. Following that discussion this section illustrates how, when seen in contrast to the Terry Schiavo affair in the United States, the pope's death served to reaffirm his understanding of true freedom.

### **John Paul II's Views on Freedom and Democracy**

During the 1980s Pope John Paul II fought alongside the West against the ideology of communism. During the post-cold war period, however, he often chastised the West for what he saw as their improper interpretation of freedom. In both instances the Pope took issue with the separation of religion from matters of state, feeling that only with religion could people have their dignity truly respected and be free. For John Paul II, fundamental freedom consisted of defending the right of Christians to live their faith in all aspects of their lives including in their government. According to the Pope, the great menace of communism, liberal democracy, and any other political ideology is the desire of antireligious political authorities threatening freedom of conscience, or in simpler terms, a dependence on secularism and denial of religious values.

Communism denies the importance of religious faith, whereas democracy minimizes it leading to what the Pope saw as a distorted conception of personal freedom in liberal democratic countries. This leads to moral relativism within a society where "truth itself would be a creation of freedom," rather than understanding that freedom flows from the truth

found in God (*Veritatis Splendor*, August 6, 1993, hereafter *VS*). The danger of the conception of freedom in secular democratic societies as the Pope understood it lies in its reliance on individual autonomy without truth as a guiding principle. This understanding leads to a relativistic conception of morality where the criteria for judgment of an action become only one's "subjective and changeable opinion, or indeed, . . . selfish interest and whim" (*EV*, no. 19). Democratic societies that deny Christians the ability to practice their own faiths do not simply risk, but rather they condemn themselves to moral relativism and a lack of respect for human dignity.

One way in which moral relativism is brought to the fore in democratic societies, according to Pope John Paul II, is through the spread of what he calls "practical atheism." Such a concept promotes the ideal of indifference in public debate, and "tends to restrict the contribution of those whose moral conscience is formed by their religious beliefs." When those who attempt to practice what they believe are ostracized from the public forum then societal debates lose "any real reference to binding truths and moral values" (John Paul II, November 11, 1993). For John Paul II this type of approach to freedom of expression, speech, and debate masks a lack of respect for human dignity by ignoring the possibility of any overarching moral or ethical principles. This approach also leads the public to wrongly believe that "everything is negotiable, everything is open to bargaining" (*EV*, no. 29). This denies a core principle of John Paul II's notion of freedom: that true freedom is connected to an understanding of the ultimate truth provided by God. If everything is negotiable, then there is no ultimate right or wrong.

John Paul II thus championed democracy as a possible, but not definitive, home for freedom. In *Centesimus Annus* (1991; hereafter *CA*) he argued that "if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power." As far as the Pope was concerned, "an authentic democracy is possible only in a state ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of the human person" (*CA*, 46). In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* the pontiff stated that legislators in a democracy had a duty to make courageous choices and use legislative measures when exercising and protecting true freedom on behalf of their constituents (no. 90). The Pope clearly believes that democracy can work, but needs to be guided by the principles of truth and a religious freedom where the believer can and must practice their faith in public. That said, he did not see this form of democracy in the West, finding it specifically absent in the United States.

During the Terry Schiavo ordeal in the United States there arose a heated public debate about state interference in ending a person's life; a debate where even the state Catholic Conferences and bishops provided middling commentary on the application of religious principles to the de-



cision making process of what to do with Terry Schiavo. Schiavo herself resided in a hospice in Florida for fifteen years, and beginning in 1998 her husband attempted to procure a court order allowing him to disconnect her feeding tubes and essentially, allow his wife to die. Finally, on March 18, 2005, after a long drawn-out court battle, the hospice removed the feeding tubes. Fourteen days later Terry Schiavo died. The culmination of this ordeal coincided with the death of a pope who spent his pontificate preaching about the necessity for legislators in democratic states to make decisions guided by what he viewed as a proper respect for human dignity. It is this foil that provides the first element of John Paul II's final homily.

### The Pope and Terry Schiavo: Faith in Democracy

Pope John Paul II and Terry Schiavo died within three days of each other, with Terry Schiavo passing on March 30 and the pontiff dying on April 2. The pope, although incapacitated and unable to speak about Schiavo's plight in his last days, commented on the situation in America through the method of his death. In the United States debates raged, polls were taken, and governments acted, but in each instance they illustrated the problems Pope John Paul II saw with a liberal democracy infected by moral relativism, and his response was a demonstration of how morals and faith should guide those in positions of power and influence.

As already discussed, John Paul II viewed freedom as a fundamental tenet of democracy, and during the Terry Schiavo affair the American government unsuccessfully attempted to practice his conceptualization of the relationship between freedom, faith, and action. Two days after the feeding tubes were removed from Terry Schiavo the Republican-dominated Congress passed a law authorizing the federal courts to assume jurisdiction over the proceedings regarding her situation. The next day President George W. Bush signed it into law, and on March 22 in compliance with that law a U.S. District Court judge refused to order the reinsertion of the tube (Jost, 2005). The federal government argued that the tubes should be reinserted because removing them was tantamount to killing a functional Terry Schiavo, an action Republican politicians felt was morally wrong. Such action, though it did fail, was congruent with public officials in a democracy making decisions based on faith and morals.

The public, on the other hand, vehemently disagreed with the actions of their government, feeling such interference infringed on personal freedom. In a *Time* poll taken after the removal of the feeding tubes 59 percent of the American public agreed with Terry Schiavo's husband that he had the right to make such decisions for his incapacitated wife. In the same poll, 75 percent of the public believed Congress had no right getting involved in

what they felt was, at worst a state issue, and at best a matter of individual freedom. The understanding of freedom illustrated by this poll exemplifies the Pope's problem with liberal democracies when they begin to see freedom as synonymous with personal autonomy. Based on the end result in the Terry Schiavo affair this understanding of freedom prevailed in the United States, however during Pope John Paul II's final days he did not miss the opportunity to demonstrate how his view of freedom should be enacted.

John Paul II's decisions regarding his medical care during his final days demonstrated freedom guided by faith, morals, and a respect for human dignity. Whereas the public felt Terry Schiavo's husband had the right to make decisions for his wife, the Pope made decisions regarding his health based on faith. Despite questions surrounding his ability to lead the Church following his admittance into Gemelli Hospital in February, the Pope continued to serve as pontiff. Pope John Paul II's decision to continue in his service to Catholics worldwide, despite his infirmity and declining health added weight to his message regarding the necessity for leaders and citizens to practice the faith they preach. In contrast to the autonomy Pope John Paul II felt Americans confused with freedom, the pope freely proclaimed his belief that life and respect for human dignity were fundamental to any moral person or society through his actions.

In addition, the Pope had a feeding tube inserted on March 30, the day Terry Schiavo died, to help the absorption of food and water into his rapidly deteriorating body. This action took place when in the United States the people firmly believed the use and removal of feeding tubes was a matter of individual choice, not moral necessity. By installing a feeding tube on the day that Terry Schiavo died from the removal of hers, John Paul II illustrated his support for the legislators and members of the American public who fought to have Terry Schiavo's feeding tubes reinserted. The pope, despite his dire condition, maintained his ability to take in food and water through the tube, reinforcing his position that if he died it would not be due to a lack of sustenance, not an individual choice regarding care. In contrast to the conscious decision by Terry Schiavo's husband to deny care to his wife, the Pope's actions demonstrated John Paul II's belief that freedom involved a maintaining medical care regardless of the person's condition. Thus the Pope indirectly chastised those who felt freedom meant an individual's right to choose.

John Paul exercised his faith in his actions during his dying days, and in so doing he simultaneously contrasted himself with the actions of Terry Schiavo's husband and the prevailing opinion of the American public. In so doing he also applauded those members of American society who made decisions through legislative measures to protect what he saw as the dignity of Terry Schiavo's humanity. However, the failure of the



American liberal democracy to act effectively and save her life represented evidence of the problems John Paul II saw in pluralistic societies ruled by majority opinion formed from a false conception of freedom. In effect, the pope's death served as a symbolic reaffirmation of his call for democracies to practice his notion of true freedom, where, among other things, a person's suffering can be seen as an expression of God's love.

### **Suffering with Dignity**

One of the reasons the American public felt Terry Schiavo and others should be allowed to die is that it alleviates suffering. Pope John Paul II disagreed with this understanding of suffering, much the same way he disagreed with America's understanding of freedom. He viewed democratic societies that see suffering as a pain they need not endure as infected with moral relativism where they wrongly place an emphasis on individual autonomy instead of true freedom. John Paul II's papacy was marked with his own suffering, and he preached about the redemptive qualities inherent in such pain. This section first explains his rhetoric on suffering during his pontificate, and then demonstrates how the last two months of his life sent a final message reiterating his understanding of the power of suffering and possibility of dying with dignity.

### **The Redemptive Power of Suffering and the Potential of Death with Dignity**

Pope John Paul II understood suffering in a vastly different way than many in today's world, and his conception of suffering is closely linked to his definition of freedom. His notion of suffering as a good runs counter to the historical approach to suffering as either punishment or evil. For the Pope, suffering holds redemptive and transformative properties that allows people to arrive at a clearer understanding of Christ and His relationship to them. Several times during his pontificate he emphasized the need to see suffering as a positive part of human development. According to the Pope, only through practicing this Christian interpretation of suffering can one truly say they are freely practicing their faith in public.

Following the attempt on his life in 1980 Pope John Paul II provided his first commentary on suffering which contained his position on how Christians can practice a true understanding of suffering in public. In this apostolic letter titled *Salvifici Doloris* he wrote that Christians who suffer gain an appreciation for the suffering Christ endured on the cross for their salvation (1984, pp. 14–15). From this perspective suffering provides an opportunity for "rebuilding of goodness in the subject, who can recognize the divine mercy in this call to repentance" (*Salvifici Doloris*, 12). Suffering

then, becomes a trial of human development whereby individuals gain a greater appreciation for the sacrifices made on their behalf by Jesus Christ, rather than a form of retribution for sinful actions.

The Holy Father addresses the connection between suffering for Christians and the suffering of Christ again in *Salvifici Doloris* where he uses the relationship to clearly establish suffering as beneficial when endured and associated with Christ's passion, "in bringing about the Redemption through suffering, Christ has also raised human suffering to the level of the Redemption" (1984, no. 19). John Paul II recognizes suffering as painful and not a pure good, but sees it as a medium through which good can come. Suffering becomes good insofar as it allows the person to share in the redemption of Christ. This approach to suffering is fundamentally different from the Western conception of suffering as a punishment or an evil.

Over a decade later, after recovering from hip surgery, the pope reiterated his belief in the positive transformative powers of suffering. In St. Peter's Square he publicly thanked Christ and Mary for the "necessary gift" of the "Gospel of suffering" whereby as Pope he could publicly demonstrate the redemptive power of suffering for all to see (John Paul II, May 29, 1994, p. 8). In *Evangelium Vitae* the Pope again emphasizes "even pain and suffering have meaning and value" (no. 97). John Paul II saw suffering as a part of human existence that we cannot escape, and as such it must serve a higher purpose than simple discomfort. That higher purpose was allowing us to more fully appreciate our relationship to Christ by sharing in his suffering through our own.

Despite his positive view on suffering John Paul II understood the need to alleviate some of the pain associated with it. As such, he argues it is ethically permissible to use powerful painkillers, even when their employment could lead to shortened life. He acknowledges that the suffering of the victim may be powerfully transformative for them were they to choose to endure it, he accepts that "such heroic behavior cannot be considered the duty of everyone." People, however, must be given the chance to "satisfy their moral and family duties and to prepare for their meeting with God" (*EV*, no. 65). Alleviating suffering is allowable, but for John Paul II suffering in and of itself is not a negative to be feared, but rather a positive opportunity to come closer to Christ. As a result, all efforts must be made to allow the person to die in a manner that maximizes their potential of that encounter with their Creator.

Throughout his papacy John Paul II confronted many different ailments and suffered publicly because of them. Despite the pain, he saw this public display of his afflictions as a way of demonstrating to the world the connection he felt with Christ through his suffering. In his last two months he suffered much, and he continued to spread the message that



these painful experiences allowed a greater appreciation and connection with Christ's passion and message. He chose to display his pain publicly, though humbly, throughout his final days illustrating through how he dealt with his hardships that suffering is not a punishment, but rather holds meaning and value for everyone through its connection to Christ.

### John Paul II's Final Affliction as a Comment on Suffering

John Paul II ended his papacy much the way he practiced it: suffering. His two-month ordeal stripped him of his last vestiges of health and rendered him speechless for many of his final days. Rather than succumb to the temptation to either resign the papacy, or give in to the pain he endured, he fought off death in a manner befitting his life. He continued to practice his faith in public despite the pain it caused him to do so. In the end, he gave medicine every realistic chance to heal his ailments, but when it became apparent that such measures would not help him further he died in a manner he felt brought him closer to Christ. Throughout these moments Pope John Paul II continued to reaffirm his belief through his actions that suffering was not a penalty, but rather a transformative and salvific experience that brought one closer to God.

The Pope made two trips to Gemelli Polyclinic Hospital during his final two months. The first took place on February 1, 2005, when he reportedly suffered from difficulty breathing brought on by complications from influenza. As a result of these complications and subsequent admission to the hospital, which the Vatican initially announced as "a precaution," the Holy Father's public appearances were cancelled for several days (Fisher & Altman, 2005, p. A6). Five days later John Paul II appeared at the window of his hospital room and greeted well-wishers with a message read by an aide, "Even here in the hospital, surrounded by other sick people . . . I continue to serve the Church and all humanity" (February 7, Fisher, p. A7). This message contained not only a declaration of his health, but a statement regarding the affect his personal pain had on his ability to lead the Church. His appearance at the window despite his inability to articulate his own message demonstrated his belief that suffering did not necessitate despair and hopelessness. In addition, the public appearance from the hospital window publicly displayed his positive outlook despite his suffering.

This episode also conjured up comparisons between the pope's suffering and that of Jesus Christ, an association that John Paul II made during his pontificate. In an article in the *Wall Street Journal* contributing editor Peggy Noonan recalled a conversation with fellow writer Michael Novak: "He could have taken him years ago. Maybe, said Mr. Novak, God wants to show us how much he loves us, and he is doing it right now by letting the



pope show us how much he loves us. Christ couldn't take it anymore during his passion, and yet he kept going" (Noonan, 2005). Michael Paulson (2005) of *The Boston Globe* observed "the pope becomes ever more Christ-like as he models suffering for a self-indulgent world" (p. A1). These associations effectively preached for the pope through the media, highlighting the connection between the suffering of Christ and his own suffering. This connection promoted the idea that suffering is a means to come closer to God by enduring pain in the same way Christ did on the cross.

### Overcoming Influenza and Leaving Gemelli

Polyclinic Hospital February 10, 2005, and the manner in which he left sent yet another message regarding suffering. Several hundred people gathered to watch John Paul II discharge himself from the hospital and drive back to the Vatican in his white popemobile, rather than in an ambulance as is standard procedure at the hospital (Fisher, February 11, 2005, p. A8). He left to return to the Vatican, the base of operations for the Catholic Church in the world, where he would be allowed to practice his faith in a place where he would be closer to God. The ailments that sent him to Gemelli Polyclinic Hospital brought him closer to those who suffer and closer to Christ's suffering. This show of public strength also temporarily allayed concerns among the people that, though he missed Ash Wednesday services for the first time during his papacy, the Pope was still healthy enough to lead the Church. The manner and timing of his recovery demonstrated his view that suffering is temporary, and it can lead one to a closer relationship with members of the community.

The reprieve from his breathing problems did not last, however, as he returned to Gemelli on February 24, 2005, exactly two weeks after his discharge, for what would be his last trip to the hospital. The Pope suffered from the flu, high fever, and spasms of the lungs that forced doctors to perform a tracheotomy, again raising questions regarding John Paul II's ability to perform his duties (Fisher, February 26, 2005, p. A1). Three days following the surgery the Pope appeared at the window to his hospital room and an aide read a short message to the throngs of people gathered below. In it he again connected suffering to salvation, "Looking at Christ and following him with patient trust, we succeed in understanding that every human form of pain contains in itself a divine promise of salvation and joy" (Fisher, February 28, 2005, p. A5). The connection made in the statement held even more power, given the condition of the Pope who still had a fever and could not speak. His actions and his health made him appear more Christ-like in that he appeared at a window above the people much like Christ suffered on a cross above his followers. This public appearance enhanced his position that suffering brought a person closer to Christ.

This second stint at Gemelli Polyclinic Hospital lasted eighteen days, and like the first visit throngs of people greeted the Pope when he left on March 13. This time, however, John Paul II returned to the Vatican in a Mercedes instead of the popemobile he used in early February creating the impression this ailment was more worrisome in that the Vatican did not want people to see the Pope in this condition. In addition, the Vatican did not pronounce the Pope cured, but rather that he was leaving the hospital to return home and "continue his convalescence." As he continued to fight his ailments the Vatican also announced the Pope would decide himself how much he would participate in Holy Week ceremonies (Fisher, March 14, 2005, p. A6). Implicit in these decisions was the pope and Vatican's understanding that the end may be approaching. That being the case, John Paul II's choices about his medical care in what proved to be his last days reflected his position that people must be allowed to satisfy their moral, familial, and societal duties in preparation for their meeting with God.

The Pope chose not to preside over any of the Holy Week festivities, a first for him during his papacy. On March 27, following Easter mass, John Paul II came to the window of his Vatican apartment and made his first public appearance since his return from Gemelli Hospital two weeks earlier. He could not speak, instead he waved to the crowd and shuffled papers for twelve minutes and his secretary of state, Angelo Cardinal Sodano, spoke the blessing the Pope had reportedly written down. The people in St. Peter's Square who gathered to see the Pope cried, recognizing the finality of this appearance (Fisher & Horowitz, p. A7). The Pope's desire to come to the window and make a public appearance despite his declining health and inability to speak indicated again his belief in the importance of publicly practicing one's faith despite physical pain. Through his suffering he reached out to Catholics, telling them strength of faith allows one to cope with the pain and come closer to Christ. In addition, his emergence from the Vatican on Easter Sunday, the same day Christians believe Christ rose from the dead, transformed the action from a mere public appearance into a symbolic experience. The Pope emerged from his suffering and pain to bless the Catholic faithful just as Christ emerged from his tomb to preach the word to the world. Such an enactment is possible for a Pope because they are seen by Catholics as the vicar of Christ on earth.

Almost immediately following his appearance the Pope's health rapidly declined, and he made several decisions during this time that emphasized his life's message regarding suffering. With his kidneys failing and breathing becoming shallow in the evening of April 1, 2005, the Pope decided against the implementation of a breathing machine or kidney dialysis (Healy, p. 46). He also refused to readmit himself to Gemelli



Hospital because he could receive the same treatment they would provide in his own apartment at the Apostolic Palace (Fisher, Rosenthal, Horowitz, & Povoledo, p. A1). The Pope also reportedly refused most painkillers while allowing the installation of a feeding tube, as he desired to be fully cognizant as he met his end (Fisher, Rosenthal, Horowitz & Povoledo, 2005; Healy, 2005). With the world watching his final hours through various media the Pope “showed us all how to die” (Healy, p. 46). In refusing certain measures to alleviate his suffering in his final hours, the Pope, one last time, illustrated his belief in the value of suffering and the importance of dying in a way that allows a person to fulfill their moral, familial, and earthly responsibilities. For Pope John Paul II, one of those responsibilities included teaching people how to suffer, come closer to Christ, and eventually die through his example.

The Pope’s final two months contained a well-choreographed message regarding how to endure suffering and how to die. He demonstrated through example that suffering, though a painful part of life, served the purpose of bringing one closer to Christ by sharing in his suffering on the cross. He emphasized this connection through his actions at Gemelli Polyclinic Hospital and in his chambers at the Apostolic Palace during his final days. Suffering with dignity brought people closer to Christ, a message the Holy Father articulated during his papacy, and one he highlighted through the way he died.

### **A Culture of Dignity (Life)**

In the latter years of his papacy Pope John Paul II decried what he saw as a “culture of death” where societies devalued human life to the point of a commodity (*EV*, no. 28). This culture grew out of the prevalence of the wrong understanding of suffering inherent in societies across the world. He wrote several encyclicals and made numerous pronouncements regarding the morally depraved actions of euthanasia and abortion present in such a culture. Through his own death he once again served as witness to a culture of life, implicitly criticizing those who did not value the elderly, infirmed, and suffering the way they should. This section first briefly outlines Pope John Paul’s definitions of a culture of life and a culture of death. It then illustrates how his final two months exemplified actions of a truly free individual who understands suffering correctly in a culture of life. When seen in contrast to the actions and debates regarding Terry Schiavo during the same time in the United States, the Pope’s message becomes even more potent because he allowed the installation of feeding tubes while Schiavo’s husband had hers removed.



## POPE JOHN PAUL II: IN SUPPORT OF A "CULTURE OF LIFE"

The third of Pope John Paul II's emphases in his life's message concerned everyone, not just Catholics and other Christians. In the waning years of his papacy he spoke against the development of a "culture of death" in the world, especially in the West, where societies tolerated and permitted crimes against life like euthanasia and abortion. They allowed these actions because of a false conception of freedom and misunderstanding about the nature of suffering. So, for most of the second half of his pontificate John Paul II concentrated on combating this form of cultural erosion with the development of a "culture of life."

According to the Pope, the culture of death represents the most significant threat to democratic societies in the contemporary world. Attacks on life such as euthanasia "represent a direct threat to the entire culture of human rights. It is a threat capable, in the end, of jeopardizing the very meaning of democratic coexistence" (*EV*, no. 18). The Pope believed that in democratic societies that do not recognize a universal moral truth, and rather value individual autonomy, the respect for the dignity of life is at risk. One of the fundamental aspects of the universal moral truth for John Paul II was, according to his biographer George Weigel, "building a culture of life is a matter of human beings working in solidarity to defend human rights—indeed, the most fundamental of human rights, the right to life itself. . . . As John Paul suggests, if we do not defend the right to life from conception until natural death with all our strength, then all other rights talk is hypocrisy" (2002, p. 50). In short, for the Pope, democracies who claim to value human rights, but also allow euthanasia and abortion as is the case in the United States, do not truly value human rights.

Western democracies rely on primarily four arguments when justifying the permission of euthanasia in their societies, but John Paul II repudiated each (Fernandes, 2001; Pelligrino, 1997, p. 236–53). The first of these is the argument from autonomy which holds that people have the right to do to their body as they will, and therefore should have the ability to choose the timing and nature of their death (Brock, 1992, pp. 10–22; Fernandes, 2001, p. 385). John Paul II countermanded this position by arguing "freedom negates and destroys itself, and becomes a factor leading to the destruction of others, when it no longer recognizes and respects its essential link with the truth" (*EV*, no. 19). Again, the Pope argued that without the recognition of a universal moral authority, democracies become more and more like tyrannies of the majority. In such a case, the Pope believed what will determine the morality of society is what most people believe as being right, not necessarily what actually is right. Thus, people who recognize the truth will be stifled in societies where the majority does not.

Even when societies recognize a universal truth, they continue to support euthanasia with arguments from compassion and arguments from the evil of suffering (Fernandes, 2001, pp. 390–93; Pellegrino, 1997, pp. 236–53). Proponents ground the former argument on the emotional need to end suffering as justification enough for euthanasia. The Pope, however, held that killing for compassionate reasons is “false mercy . . . a disturbing perversion of mercy. True compassion leads to sharing another’s pain; it does not kill the person whose suffering we cannot bear” to witness (*EV*, no. 66). Arguments from the evils of suffering hold that suffering is meaningless, and thus an evil which necessitates relief, even if the only way to relieve the pain is through death (Pellegrino, 1997, p. 245). As we have already seen, Pope John Paul II understood suffering in a different way, negating these arguments for euthanasia.

The final arguments proponents employ are arguments from the loss of dignity. The idea here is that suffering removes human dignity by creating a feeling of isolation in the patient, thus by removing the pain and isolation a person is allowed to die with dignity (Fernandes, 2001, p. 394; Kass, 1990; Koch, 1996). Ashley K. Fernandes (2001) articulates a response to this argument from the position of John Paul II, saying that in a society that understands dignity in such a way is not really a community at all, “the vision of the common good is lost—the person is sacrificed because they are too heavy a burden, too expensive, too hard to look at or treat. The sense of community is destroyed because the perception that the community desires you and desires to take care of you will be lost” (p. 394). In such an individualistic society people are equated with commodities that, when their usefulness is at an end, must be expedited to their end to preserve the dignity of their life. John Paul II, as we have already underscored, saw suffering as transformative not just for the person in pain but for those around them as well. For John Paul II, death with dignity involved the maintaining of a strong connection to the community and to Christ until the natural end is reached.

That connection can be sustained through a better understanding of suffering. Rather than surrender to death when a person suffers, societies should give increased attention “to methods of palliative care which seek to make suffering more bearable in the final stages of illness and to ensure that the patient is supported and accompanied in his/her ordeal” (*EV*, no. 65). Such care includes placing an individual in a hospice where their final moments on earth are more comfortable and the patient still receives the basic necessities of life such as food and hydration. Such treatment is a far cry from euthanasia and respects the dignity of human life, but is seemingly forgotten in the debates surrounding end of life care in the West.

The Pope did not equate euthanasia with all forms of end of life care in the West, as he drew distinctions between proportionate and disproport-



tionate medical assistance and their relationship to euthanasia. In cases where death is unavoidable and inevitable, like Terry Schiavo for instance, a patient can "refuse forms of treatment that would only secure a precarious and burdensome prolongation of life, so long as the normal care due to the sick person in similar cases is not interrupted" (EV, no. 65). The forms of treatment that can be morally justifiable to refuse do not include measures to assist feeding and hydration in a patient, as these would be considered "normal care." The Pope also specifically stated that "quality of life judgments" cannot be applied to patients in these situations, and to refuse or deny nutritional assistance amounts to euthanasia by omission (John Paul II, no. 4). Nutrition and hydration assistance must be allowed for patients in any situation, and to deny them to a person is to deny them their human dignity.

The culture of life the Pope espoused is a society where people recognize life as a gift from God. It is this connection of life to God that from which the Pope's position on the inviolability of human life flows. When a society adopts a culture of life "it will be able to confront and solve today's unprecedented problems affecting human life . . . because it will be capable of bringing about a serious and courageous cultural dialogue among all parties" (EV, no. 95). The problems he referred to are abortion, euthanasia, and war, and in a culture of life each of these can be successfully overcome because the people in society recognize the gift of life and the need to protect it.

Protecting life is a central tenet of the papacy of John Paul II, and it is closely tied to his views on freedom and suffering. In establishing euthanasia and abortion as direct threats to democracies and freedom the Pope created an image of the West as morally depraved due to their allowance of such practices. Though these societies may consider themselves enlightened because euthanasia seemingly alleviates suffering, the Pope contended that they are led by moral relativism and ignorance to the true nature of suffering. During the Pope's final two months a battle raged in the United States regarding Terry Schiavo. The Schiavo episode produced the practices of a culture of death, while the Pope's dying days illustrated how to truly die with dignity in a culture of life.

### **John Paul II and Terry Schiavo: Culture of Life versus Culture of Death**

The contrast of the Pope's final two month's with Terry Schiavo's final days produces a message by the Holy Father more potent than anything he could have said. Terry Schiavo had been in a persistent vegetative state for almost fifteen years, receiving medically assisted nutrition and hydration until her last two weeks when courts ruled her husband had the right to end such care and let her die (Jost, 2005). Such



an act constitutes what the Pope referred to as "euthanasia by omission," and represented a characteristic of culture of death. In the Pope's dying days he had feeding tubes inserted to ensure he received basic, or proportionate, care as he approached death. The Pope also rejected a ventilator, something seen as disproportionate care in his eyes, illustrating for the public what assistance patients needed and which they could refuse. The Pope made each of these decisions in his last three days, which were also the three days following the death of Terry Schiavo in the United States. The Holy Father repudiated the actions of what he considered the culture of death in the West one last time by showing how to die with dignity in a culture of life.

Terry Schiavo had spent the better part of her last fifteen years in a hospice in Florida receiving nutrition and hydration through intravenous methods. Her parents fought hard to keep her attached to these assistive technologies, but in the end the courts sided with her husband and removed the devices. The courts were not the only ones who felt she should be removed from the machines; the American public overwhelmingly supported the position of the husband and rejected parental oversight (Jost, 2005). John Paul II had no living parents, but treated the doctrine of the Catholic Church as parental directions flowing from his Father. Those directions required that he respect his life in its final days by doing everything possible to keep nutrition and hydration flowing despite his condition (Rosenthal & Fisher, 2005). This adherence to a universal moral law in contrast to the individual moral relativism seen in the Schiavo ordeal by her husband and the American public illustrated what John Paul II saw as a fundamental problem with Western democracies: a lack of respect for life.

Looking at opinion polls one can see the moral decline of the West in the eyes of John Paul II. In 1950 only 26 percent of the American public felt a patient's life should be ended by a doctor if their disease could not be cured. By 2003 that number skyrocketed to 72 percent (Jost, 2005, p. 428). The Pope was no doubt aware of the drastic climb in such numbers as he wrote several encyclicals and letters regarding the moral problems with euthanasia and by choosing to die the way he did; that is by accepting all proportionate care, he admonished the American public for their tolerance of such activities.

The Pope also supported hospice care through his actions by returning home to the Vatican when it became apparent the doctors at Gemelli could do no more for him. At the Vatican he could receive intravenous feeding and breathing assistance much the same way a hospice provides for an infirmed individual in other societies. He illustrated for all to see that such care allows a person to confront their end in relative comfort while preparing for their meeting with the Almighty. In returning home he was also able to die with those he cared most about surrounding him, maintaining a connection to society and allowing the community to

which he belonged to feel connected to him in his final days. His death then, contained utility, contrary to the belief of those who would practice euthanasia on those they see as a burden to society.

The Pope's connection to society could be seen not only in his final few actions, but also in how the world received them. During his last few days as news of his declining health reached the public "the mood was mournful" as "Italians and pilgrims crying and kneeling on" the cobblestones of St. Peter's Square (Fisher, Rosenthal, Horowitz & Povoledo, 2005). When the Vatican announced his death people not only wept in St. Peter's Square, but in Krakow, Poland, the Pope's homeland, as well (Bernstein, 2005; Fisher, Povoledo, & Horowitz, 2005). World leaders such as U.S. President George W. Bush felt compelled to comment on the Pope's death, saying, "The world has lost a champion of human freedom and good and faithful servant of God has been called home. Pope John Paul II was himself an inspiration to millions of Americans and to so many more throughout the world" (Fisher, Povoledo, & Horowitz, 2005). With millions around the world watching, the Pope died with the same connection to the human community that he felt people required. His death did not represent suffering by isolation as those who support euthanasia believe happens, but rather a death comforted by the connection to people across the globe.

Terry Schiavo's ordeal in the United States embodied the culture of death that the Pope warned the West about. His death sent a message that such a culture was not necessary and that humans could and should die with dignity. That dignity is inherent in a feeling of connection to the community that comes with, and is not denied by, suffering. In practicing his faith freely and publicly, John Paul II used his final days to comment on the Terry Schiavo episode and to rail against the dangers of a culture of death one last time. That commentary chastised the American public and Terry Schiavo's husband for what he considered euthanasia and attempted to show the world that suffering and death are nothing to fear. His death also begged the question of whose suffering euthanasia alleviates: the person dying, or those they leave behind? From his viewpoint as someone who welcomed death as another step, the answer is the latter, thus making the acceptance of euthanasia by society unacceptable.

## A FINAL WORD

In early 2005 events conspired to allow a dying eighty-four-year old priest an opportunity to convey a symbolic homily to his one billion plus parishioners. Pope John Paul II spent the majority of his twenty-six-year papacy conveying to the world the importance of true freedom, the value of suffering, and the dangers of a culture of death. Each of these are connected to the others, and in his final two months the Pope illustrated their importance for



the world to see. When seen in contrast to the Terry Schiavo affair in the United States that occurred virtually simultaneously, the Pope's actions during his last days reaffirmed his belief in the significance of understanding freedom and suffering appropriately, and the necessity to protect the dignity of human life.

There is a cliché that fits this scenario appropriately: actions speak louder than words. The Pope could not speak, so all he could do to teach his flock about the meaning of these important values was demonstrate how to enact them in our lives. In a time when the Church has had to confront the specter of child molestation among the clergy, dwindling attendance across Europe, and assaults from its more liberal members, a public demonstration of morality by the Pope in his dying days provided more of a lesson than any words he could have spoken would have done.

He held to the conviction that there was one universal moral truth to which free people must ascribe, and in his last few days he adhered to those principles that flowed from such a truth. He demonstrated to the world the power of faith and its ability to help one cope with suffering. In effect, he practiced in his final days what he preached his entire life. His death illustrated the connection to Christ he felt suffering allowed one to achieve. It demonstrated how to die with dignity, thus repudiating calls for euthanasia. Ultimately, he used his death to show how a truly free person acts in a society that respects life.

In contrast to American public opinion and the husband's actions in the Terry Schiavo appeal, the Pope died in a way that showed the world the line between proportionate and disproportionate care for the dying. He allowed doctors to hook him up to assistive feeding devices, while Terry Schiavo was removed from them with the consent of her husband and the approval of American society. This behavior symbolically decried the position taken by Terry Schiavo's husband and the American public, demonstrating that one can still be connected to the community despite the severity of their condition. It is that connection John Paul II sought to have people respect.

The Pope's final homily spoke on the Terry Schiavo affair, but more important it reaffirmed his life's message regarding freedom, suffering, and life. Free societies feel a connection to the community at all stages of life, including when they suffer, and to sustain such freedom citizens and legislators in those societies must do everything they can to protect life. Suffering does not disconnect one from the community, rather it enhances their association and appreciation of Christ, further entrenching them in the community. Only those democracies and societies that respect life and understand the salvific nature of suffering can truly be free. That was the Pope's final message to the world through his actions, and it did not change from the message he preached his entire life.

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